THE CARTOGRAPHER OF MEMORY

Boluwatife Afolabi

Poems

SANKOFAMAG

Praise for *The Cartographer of Memory*

"In *The Cartographer of Memory*, Olu Afolabi courts the sensual and the metaphysical. In his poetic reckoning, mapping memory requires both an individual and collective meshwork. He lets memory mingle with imagination and his cartography becomes a metaphor for affection, perception and discovery."
— Dami Ajayi
Writer, Critic

"We could as well call this the "Cartographer of Voices". What the poet does, with much heart, is burrow into voices and speak with their tonalities. He takes it further, questing with scorching tenderness and the sort of rare kindness which only proceeds from forgiveness. I have said our generations' point of turning is our gospel, in poetry of the republic of tenderness. And love. The voice here is full of love."
— Gbenga Adesina
Joint Winner, 2016 Brunel Poetry Prize
StarWorks Poetry Fellow at New York University

"In poems that reveal a clarity and depth of understanding that one seldom sees but always seeks, Olu Afolabi writes about our world today — from the suffering in Syria to the search for love in dark places — with a grace and brilliance that suggests he has the gift all of the great poets have."
— John Guzlowski
Author, *Echoes of Tattered Tongues*
Winner of the Eric Hoffer/Montaigne Award

"With Afolabi's work, he answers the primordial need for poetry to exist—empathy both with the distant and the familiar. Olu Afolabi's work abounds with hope, emerges as fresh, and is an important collation of focal points in a world plagued with distractions."

— Yinka Elujoba
Art critic. Author, *Collective Truth*

"Olu Afolabi remembers the dead, the missing, the broken, children underneath a bridge hiding from water, failed attempts at love and other events we so often let go unacknowledged, unrecorded. The world suffers severe bouts of forgetfulness and *The Cartographer of Memory* is a dose of *Memantine."*

— Moyosore Orimoloye
Joint Winner, 2016 Babishai Niwe Poetry Prize

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'Conversations (with Rafka)' — Praxis Magazine.

'Inamorata' — Expound Magazine.

'Breathe' was published on Arts and Africa as 'Healing is a woman'

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Foreword

Before our very eyes, the poetry of Boluwatife Afolabi has emerged, as butterfly from cocoon, and taken dainty flight. It is a privilege to witness these protean moments and to relish the ineffable joy they yield.

This chapbook has seen prior incarnations. In the way that the wind happens to the place with most of the tall grass, Afolabi's inspiration has settled on those boughs that most exercise our sentience and our humanity. He, the poet, has come a long way from where he started. If the trajectories mapped in these poems are any indication, this poet is one to watch.

I'm chuffed, to be asked to write this introduction to a poet of enormous promise and potential. I am amazed at the quality of mind and poetics deployed in this chapbook. I've watched the unfurling of the banner. Seeing it flying the crest of Afolabi's imagination with the first rays of this new day bolsters my faith in the future of African poetry.

The poems here are shaped by a vigilant intelligence and an astute understanding of what matters. They have an emotional depth to them that belie the age or experience of the poet. In these poems, one inexorably comes to agree with the sage who observed that good poems know more than the poet does.

In a time when hunger for fame and undisguised greed for money has come to describe some self-styled poets, it is truly refreshing to encounter a true poet. True poets are moved by what they can give, what they can describe, what they can create - not merely what they can get.

Afolabi's poems are pollinators, they are butterflies to be admired for their damask, yes, but they are way more than what appears. They keep the cycle of energy and life going. This, ultimately, is what we are wired for. This is why poems such as are here contained will always matter.

— Tade Ipadeola
Author, *The Sahara Testaments*

Poet's Statement

My poetry bears witness to the evolution of the human consciousness. To record, to heal, to serve as triggers of memory. Sometimes, it doesn't heal, and rereading words break me. But I'd rather become a sea of memory than to have existed without having written.

The delight in the recognition of our shared humanity (in loss, in suffering, in love) is what spurs me. The desire to become a lens through which a shred of emotion can be viewed in full detail, absorbed, felt. There is nothing more glorious.

"Certain truths, you hold them against the light and they change colour."

— Clifton Gachagua

Fragile

(for her new lover)

After Gbenga Adesina

With her,
you will come to learn that
it is okay to be soft in love
like silk,
like wet hair.
She will teach you to say
the names of your old lovers
into the wind without
breaking into water again;
how the other name for god
is love and how open hearts
can be prison doors.
Her tongue, an alloy of fire
and magic that burns and soothes
in lost languages,
you know this because there are nights
when you come back cold,
splintered in hidden places in need of
mending and she will breathe
into your bones and tell you in whispers
that men are fragile things.
And you will
laugh the way men do
but offer no rebut to her.

A Game of Numbers

Say an arbitrary night
(could be moonless or not
depending on the mood of the universe)

Say a man,
—*our protagonist*
walks into a street and
it swallows him whole

Say in this street he stumbles
into another man's dream.
—*our antagonist*

Say he gets trapped
and our antagonist walks up to him
olive branch in hand
offering him terms of freedom—

'A game of number and words'
to see how much of memory, he carried
with him into this dream:

59?
27.05.14
in a Northern night
accompanied by stars
59 boys embraced sleep warmly.
some of our boys are dreaming
of water and girls

(some people call this a wet dream)
some, of home—
somewhere safe from canes
and bullies
and homework.

They have their dreams interrupted
by a bearded reality
carrying the name of god in a turban
seeking atonement for sins
with guns and bombs and fear.
in Buni Yadi;
59 martyrs died for our iniquities
but we still don't have salvation

4?
violence is a living word
a living-breathing word

4 boys walked into a quiet town
and we rushed to welcome them
with kisses of fire and gasoline
watched it spread through the roofs,
of mouths that begged for god and rain
we watched with rage-deafened-ears
as fire painted bones black

in Aluu,
before 1000 judges
8 eyes burnt into darkness,
we called it justice.

1?

tragedy has many portraits.
it could be a mother
whispering lyrics of an old song
into the ears of a deaf toddler
or a boy waking up in the
shoes of a man he used to call father
smelling of alcohol
and uncertainty.

But there is a picture of tragedy
that has painted itself on the walls of my mind
that I have tried to clean
but it won't go away:

1 man—
an old friend
hung on a tree
chanting:

'Eli,
Eli,
Lema
Sabachthani'

Memory is not enough
there are dreams that never end.

Sabar

(For Syria)

I have seen with my own eyes, the Sibyl hanging in a jar, and when the boys asked her 'what do you want?' she answered, 'I want to die'

— Petronius.

1st Invocation

To wait is to die.
Every teardrop is a sea
in the eyes of God.
Every gunshot
every blast
every wail
tearing through the darkness
is a missing tone
in the orchestra of grief.
Hades seeks home
in bodies of children
in rubble
in graves,
I have housed pain
in my bones
But there is a little space
for the peace mother offers
beyond the veil
so, I will wait.

2nd Invocation

To leave is to die.
On the road,
outside Aleppo

asphalt is painted
with the blood of lost boys
and running women
the birds sing in silence,
for new songs don't grow in throats
that have grown limp from praying.

Every sunrise is a miracle,
every breath is a promise
waiting to be broken,
to leave is to die on the sea
(where the water
takes and takes what is left
of hope)
hunger boring into intestines
paralyzed by want
by fear
by exhaustion,
I must wait.

3rd Invocation
To live is to die.
(My tongue wears these words well now).
I have sang it into every song
every tune
it feels like
there is no other song
left for me.
I die every time
I close my eyes to sleep
I die every time
I walk these streets
Yet,

five times every day
I must gather myself into prayers
and pray
and pray
and wait.

Breathe

Healing is a woman
or a rainbow
or a dream
(where fear comes to die—
where I grow wings and float
into the arms of god).
There is healing
in the touch of mother
on my skin.
praying fever away
with will
and fire
and olive.
Healing is the smile
of my father,
a miracle—
like the eclipse in '01
that hid me from *Gehenna* till
light swallowed.
There is healing
in the quiet
before dawn
earth surging back to life,
memories gathering themselves
back into bodies,
children falling
out of dreams—
into water
into love.

Healing is the laughter
of a stranger
on the bus home (or away from home)
—she said
'*laughter can drown the voice*
of tragedy'
—I said
'show me'
Then she burst
into a river of songs.
Later that night,
we held hands and drowned
in a sea of laughter.

There is healing in the voice of god
on a boat
floating in Galilee
saying:
peace be still
peace be still
peace be still
breathe!

Captive

Here is how you take prisoners:

It's in the way you walk into rooms,
swaying
soft like breeze
commanding attention
like you are god
like you created it all.

It's the way you paint your name
onto the tongues of men
who dared to touch you
who dared to whisper honey into silence?

It's the way you become magic,
how you weave yourself into air and cause us to inhale you
how your glassy eyes stare into our faces
like you can see into the mirror of our souls
like you know the colour of our sins.

Nefertiti,
you write lust on our skins
and you stand afar
watching us
flow into softness
bleed into songs
beg once more for ecstasy.

that is how you take prisoners.

Conversations

(with Rafka)

Rafka: They say you are a poet,
the curator of grief
tell me,
how can you describe a pain you haven't felt?

Pain does not have a mother-tongue
no language
no rhythm
only taste
and touch.

She touches us in different ways
but we only feel her in one way.

She folds me into a shadow
and teases me with light.

She carves my tears into harp
and strings an orchestra of sorrow.

She says I must write,
that it's my only escape from this dream
so, I write.

Rafka: Where did all my sad songs go?

They came to live in my bones
they said your heart got too heavy

while sailing the river of days
and started drowning.

They said my skin is a light house
that shines only on broken things
and sings:
'home is here
home is here
there are no mirrors here
shadows dance to echoes here'

Rafka: What is the reason for hollow graves?

There are many reasons why silence dies;

1) *Alone is always seeking companionship.*
2) *Hell despises hymns of solitude.*
3) *Eternity is the curse of time, lightnings are pictures of ghosts escaping.*
4) *Catacombs are imploding into rivers of songs.*
5) *Silhouettes of memories flock to bays reeking of nostalgia.*
6) *Misery tastes like white chalk on blue tongue, seeking air.*
7) *Empty rooms don't smell like home.*
8) *Lost ships still dream of shore.*

Rafka,
Hollow graves got tired of waiting-
for scents of flowers
so they became flowers.

Dead Men

For Romeo Oriogun

3:05 AM
A boy jumps out of a watery dream
into the embrace of his dark room
to watch a man break himself
bit by bit into love and loss.
A boy calls this man father.
Say empty rooms—
We walk back in time
holding hands through corridors
heavy with the stench of memory,
we pick a spot in history
sit,
and watch our mistakes come to life again—
sister (a sunflower) gets scorched
I watch father dream all the dreams he couldn't live
mother melts into a river of loneliness
she sucks us in,
we all drown.
The universe is weaving living jokes out of dying bones
but our tongues are already too heavy with the names of all the
dead we carry,
so we don't laugh.
Say lost soles—
We try to trace cracks on the wheel of nostalgia
with fingers that have grown weary of touching broken things
(dreams, women, walls, hearts)
to find where we first gathered our strength into smoke

and gave it to the sky
where we first lost it—
the will to stand without crumbling into a sea
to live without dying a little,
god is rewriting hope on the skin of lost children
but we can't find them
we can't touch them
we can't bring them home
we can't make them stay.
Say dead men—
Grief is the mother of loss,
loss is the brother of despondency and
before we got our fingers wet
soiled even,
snooping through wreckages of love that
couldn't grow in a body besieged with want
for things that don't die,
before we gifted our prayers to the wind
begging it to ride to the ears of god,
before silence became a ritual we
immersed ourselves in to survive,
before the breaking,
before the healing,
we had first tried to dream you back to life in different
forms—
in still waters
in growing fire
in warm air,
we failed.
You mirror me,
and for you
I gather desire the way
birds gather sounds in a beak

beckoning morning to fulfill the promise of renewal,
I am gathering every dying piece of this body
into a song and gifting it to the wind again,
I am driftwood floating in the sea
drifting,
unyielding,
staring into the face of god
daring heaven to shatter me again.

For Women Who Break Often

Before you learnt to rewrite love
on the old leaflets of your skin,
you had spent nights
clawing at walls that won't yield
for memories that won't heal,
calling for god
in all the languages mother didn't teach
seeking a sign
or a voice
or a dream
a reason, to stop yourself
from growing smaller and smaller.
Before you had come to accept that echoes are simply
voices that didn't make it home and
not every dream can be cradled to life inside
palms scarred by thorny ardencies
you first broke yourself into many waters
and fed them to lost men
but they rolled you in their mouths,
gargled you on tongues that have forgotten the taste of
affection
and spat you out
said you were lukewarm,
too soft,
too hard,
said a woman
cannot be both
water
and fire.

If Anything, Be A Dream

If anything, be a dream
or an old song
or a fountain
drowning the sounds
of silence
or a prayer
stuck in the throat
of an old monk.
If anything, be laughter
sharp
loud
ringing
something to pierce
the veil of grief
an extra reason to breathe
or you could be a lamp in a dark room
or the rainbow after Noah
or the sun after his flood.
If anything, by god
please be a dove
carrying a branch of olive in a beak
to Syria
be a shield
in Aleppo
be a blanket
or drinking water
or a safe roof
for Oman.

Inamorata

Ìfé mi,
You are poetry
flowing between troubled fingers,
a ray of sunlight
on dark mornings,
piercing shield
unveiling emotions I thought
were gone,
speaking life
into my bony heart.
If tables were to suddenly turn
and you ever became
something distant,
something vague,
like an old song
whose lyrics I have forgotten,
I swear it!
I'd love you back to life,
I'd whisper your name
to the clouds
for every time
your lips brushed mine,
I'd write a poem
for every time
I saw god in your eyes,
I'd worship *Kutsiami,*
ferry in his stead
till he gives you back to me—
Whole,

Wingless,
Warm.

Initiation

(for T.)

When you touch me
the way you touch me
my insides melt into a song
and my tongue wants to build
a city of melodies inside you.
I want to draw maps on your skin
with fingers and lust,
drown desire in the sea
welling in your eyes,
go back to Babel
and tell them—
how 1000 languages cannot paint you
into a poem,
how 5 senses are not enough
to carry all of you inside of me,
how 1 lifetime is too short
to love you into immortality.

Introspection

(*Songs for Plath*)

My heart is a tomb where hope comes to live.
I go to parties of happiness to breathe,
I inhale all the light around me
and leave the parties when it gets dark,
too dark for men to see
without stumbling into sadness.
Too dark to feel for lighters that lift souls of men high.
I watch their fears colliding from a distance,
I giggle.

II.

On quiet days
when there are no songs left in my lungs,
I write.
I like to write stories of women that died
while embracing life—
firmly,
women we thought had too much of her in them
but we never cared to look beneath their skins.
On autopsy,
the Pathologist said he found castles living inside them,
castles that echoed whispers.

III.

There are nights when I dream;
I am a bird,
carrying happiness within my beak
flying towards a nest I do not know.

I never get home.
An angry storm breaks my beak into two,
happiness dissolves into a stream of darkness.
I wake up screaming.
Sweating.

To Love is to Die

To love is to die every night
hoping to wake up in a dream
where love is a language,
ecstasy; a song
where prayers flow into rivers
and children wake at dawn to
fetch blessings into a gourd.
To love is to break
your body into a sea
hoping to find a soul
trusting enough to drown inside you.
To love is to run from emptiness
(the memory of home:
Mother, singing songs of loneliness
into the mirror
Father, pouring his anger
into wine)
into fire.
To love is to grow,
the fusion of bodies in the darkness
waiting for a sunrise—
god shining his light
on the miracle we made
in the night.
To love is to seek,
to become a traveler
or a skeptic
or a gypsy
knowing we might not find

the fire we seek
but continue to nurse the embers
we found on the road
hoping that someday,
they grow into a sun.

Seeking Shelter

Under the bridge at *Mokola*,
children are melting into water
mothers are growing into trees.
I am a lone observer,
watching the re-purification
of earth
by god.
Man flowing from sand
into sand,
man flowing into man
man becoming one with water
and god.

A Memento for the Forgotten

And I am a sin because
I am a little broken
and don't work like I used to and
I am thrown away inside a pit and covered
with red soil and father says my sisters
must hush that I am dissolved
into memory now and must be forgotten
because I am a little broken and don't work
and it is dark inside this pit and it is hard
to be alone and my head is banging
like there is a church bell singing inside my brain
and I try to cry but the water is not coming
through and there are voices stuck in my throat
and I try to call the name of god
but he doesn't answer and I wonder if he doesn't like
me too because I look like sin
but mama said he loves little children
and mama does not lie like pa and I don't understand
why he wouldn't answer if I am truly a child
and flower and innocent and helpless and crying
and I close my eyes because they are heavy
and tired of fighting and remember all the
times I was not in a hole smelling of death
and looking like sin and it is December again
and my room is blue and the flowers are red
and god is shining his light through the window
and smiling and the choir is singing
Noel on radio and I want to melt into hymns
and honey but this happiness

is suddenly too heavy for my heart
like I am carrying dead people in my chest
and I stop thinking because it hurts too
and I call the name of god again
and he still doesn't answer and I think
maybe pa is right maybe I am truly dissolved
into memory like an old dream
and this is where old songs come to die
and this story is almost ending now
and I am still afraid of the dark
but I still don't understand
why god's light wouldn't reach out to me
if I am truly a child and flower
and innocent and helpless and crying.

RATIONALE

(Excuses for why we failed at love too)
After Warsan Shire

1) Because love is never enough.
2) You smell like another man's war.
3) Your lover's tongue is a gypsy that is always seeking home in new women.
4) There are rooms in his heart he doesn't want you to enter (He forgot how to enter them without first breaking into a sea or a tornado).
5) You were never enough.
6) You were too enough (There was too much of you in the air he breathes, he claimed too much love chokes people).
7) We allowed the music of silence to overwhelm the sounds of our laughter.
8) Love is a language that keeps on un-sticking itself from our tongues.
9) He carries the ghosts of all his old lovers in his bones, there was no space for you to live.
10) She found warmth in the arms of a man that doesn't look like you or her father or that Mathematics teacher from grade 4.
11) We were both looking for something that couldn't be found in heaven and orgasms.
12) The women in your family smell of loneliness.
13) Because your love is a quicksand that takes and takes.
14) She got tired of waiting (her love aged into a valley of dry bones)
15) We were too afraid to fly, afraid the wind will break

our wings, so we settled for a middle ground (somewhere between believing and becoming)

16) *Love appeared to us in the form of a shadow, we couldn't touch it, couldn't hold it, couldn't make it stay.*

17) *How can you love a man who moulded his own tongue into fire? (How do you make love to fire?)*

18) *Because forever is a myth told by lonely housewives.*

19) *You can't grow love out of memories; you can't trap love in a body.*

20) *Mother said 'not all men can be soft enough to be written into songs'; but you tried to compose a symphony for a man whose father only taught him how to be hard.*

21) *You can't pray bad love away.*

22) *Before you first learnt that another name for god is love, you had spent nights writing love in the hearts of godless men.*

23) *You fell for the rhetoric of the society 'Men don't love like that...'*

24) *Love is not your mother tongue (you tried to love a man in a language you are yet to fully understand)*

25) *He said your past was a pill that was too hard to swallow, a memory that won't die, a ghost that won't go home to rest.*

26) *Love is just a word.*

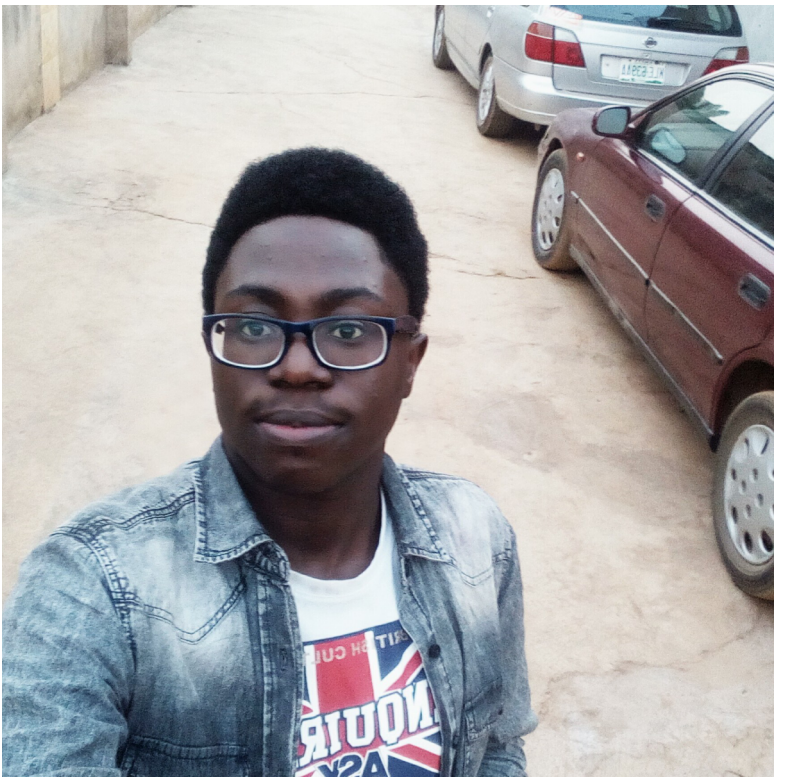
27) *Our passion got lost in translation.*

28) *She got tired of breaking.*

29) *The same fire that wrought love also burnt love.*

30) *Nana, we stopped dreaming.*

Author's Profile



Boluwatife Afolabi is a Nigerian poet and an associate poetry editor at Agbowo.org.

His poems have appeared in: Arts and Africa, Kalahari Review, African Writer, Expound Magazine, Praxis Magazine and Saraba Magazine. In 2017, he was listed on nantygreens.com as one of the top ten contemporary Nigerian poets to be read.

He lives and writes from Ibadan, Nigeria. He tweets via @oluafolabi.

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SankofaMag is a platform where brave thinking and bold new voices challenge, inform and entertain the world. An avant-garde mix of storytelling and cutting-edge creativity, our contributors create timeless and compelling stories in the advancement of literature, the arts and discourse of the world's most important and intriguing topics.

SankofaMag brings a creative twist to the practice of journalism thus creating a middle-ground where literary dexterity and best practices from the journalism profession are combined to delight our audience. With foundational interests in culture, development and politics, we publish art, features, fiction, interview, podcast, poetry and focused chapbooks for the young and old.

GUIDELINES

Contributors are invited to send in up to three pieces for consideration. There are no restrictions as to topic, style or theme as long as they are related to the overall focus of the magazine in the areas of culture, development and politics.

All entries must be original, unpublished, in English and typed at 1.5 spacing in Microsoft Word. Submissions in other languages must be accompanied with English translation. Entries should be sent to engage@sankofainitiative.org and must be accompanied by a short profile and portrait picture. The word "Submission" and the entrant's name must appear in the subject line of the email transmission.

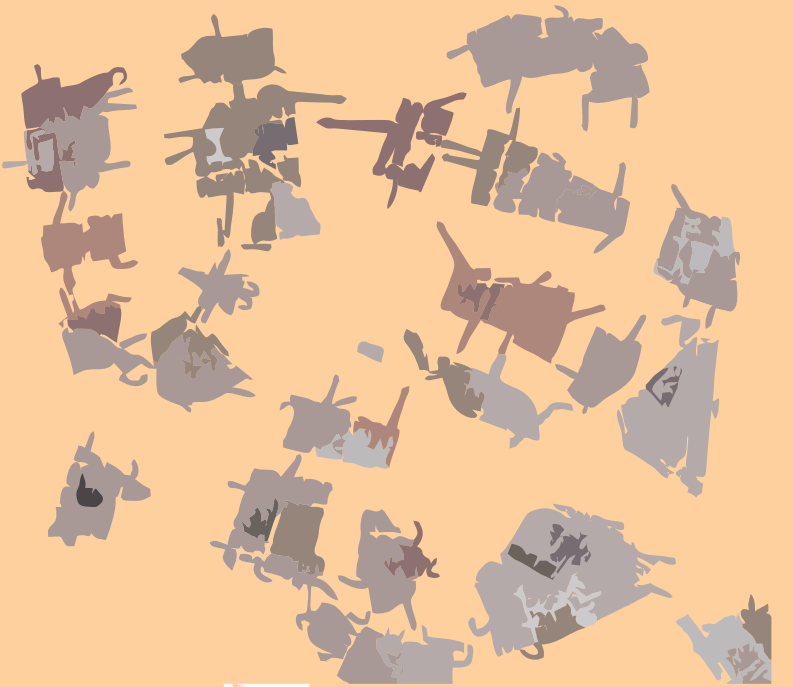
ACCEPTANCE

Selected contributors will receive emails acknowledging receipt of their work as well as details of scheduled publication dates within six months. We acquire first electronic publishing rights. All other rights revert to the contributor after publication. Published work remains part of *SankofaMag's* online archive and may be considered for the digital edition and our annual print anthologies. If the work is reprinted elsewhere, we ask that you acknowledge *SankofaMag* as the original place of publication.

It should be noted that selected contributors will not be paid but will enjoy a nonexclusive access to the magazine and the freedom to share its contents with the world. Where an entry is selected for publication in the digital edition or our annual anthologies, the contributor will be duly informed and will also receive a copy of the publication.

THE CARTOGRAPHER OF MEMORY

Boluwatife Afolabi



Poems

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